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# The Pain of Our Bodies and Souls

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# The Pain of Our Bodies and Souls



**Wendolens Ruano Zazueta**  
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**M**y heart is heavy, I feel the weight of my heart pounding against my chest, bruising and breaking me from the inside. The weight in my soul is the agony, violence, and hate that students of color are facing at institutions of higher education across the country. I know that like myself, students of color at The University of Utah are facing similar crimes against our bodies and our souls. We feel the sorrow, hate, pain, fear, and anger as we pursue our education and it is exhausting. It exhausts my body and my mind. Being on this campus exhausts my spirit. For so long, we have endured and challenged painful rhetoric and thinking, putting our histories, our bodies, our lives on the line for a taste of justice at an institution that often tokenizes us. My daily experience here reminds me that this institution was not built for me. It was never built for us. I am a graduate student in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy at The University of Utah. On November 13, 2015, the president of the University, David Pershing, sent a letter to college deans and department chairs across the Salt Lake City campus inviting the University community to participate in

a solidarity march. The march was described as an opportunity to express "strong support of anti-racism, and as a show of our collective will to combat all forms of bigotry" (Pershing, 2015). In the letter, he invited students, faculty, and staff to participate in a dialogue after the march that would focus on "racial climate on our campus, in our classrooms, and in our daily lives" (Pershing, 2015). I did not find out about the march from my dean nor from my department chair, but from a close friend, who is also a student in my department. Students and faculty of color heard about the event through the grapevine, through our networks, and strong connections with one another. In planning this event, neither the President nor anyone from his administration worked collaboratively with student groups on campus to coordinate the event. Thus, when I found out about the march and the dialogue, I felt invisible and unimportant. Racial tensions among different ethno-racial groups on campus were already heavy and as the week progressed, our divisions intensified. The President's announcement did not unite us, but further divided us and as a result, the week leading up to the march was painful. The invitation

that the President sent to the University community didn't seem to be an invitation to us, students of color, because we were never consulted.

One week later, on Friday, November 20, 2015, students, faculty, staff, and community members gathered outside the president's office. I could feel the intensity in the air, our bodies served as a witness to the pain endured at this institution and while I was conflicted, I was present. I wanted the opportunity to stand in solidarity with each other and to stand in solidarity with our brothers and sisters at Mizzou, Yale, Harvard, and other universities across the nation who are coming into consciousness and recognizing our collective power. Together, I stood in solidarity with every student, faculty member, and staff member who has had to work and exist in a university system fueled by what Ta-Nehisi Coates (2015) refers to as "the Dream"- the fantasy of meritocracy that thrives off the ignorance of White America. I looked out and saw others standing in solidarity and carrying posters that were critical of the university, critical of the administration, and I witnessed a breaking of silence imposed on marginalized bodies through taped mouths and signs that read: "Do we matter?"

We marched with dignity and with accumulated disappointment. We arrived at the ballroom where the president and his administration were seated at the front of the stage facing us – a large audience of pain. Members of his administration explained to us that the forum was an opportunity for them to listen to us, to learn about how we experience the institution. But what went unrecognized by every single member of the administration seated in front of us was the pain required to recount our stories – to recount how we survive this space. The administration said repeatedly that what they were about to hear would be difficult, but

necessary in order to enact change and ensure an inclusive climate for all of us. But no recognition was given to how difficult the process of sharing can be, how intricately embodied the experience of storytelling is (Anzaldúa, 1987; Ayala, Herrera, Jiménez, & Lara, 2006). Our accumulated anger, disappointment, and wounds, were expressed in a condensed space meant to extract and contain our outrage. Students expressed their thoughts, experiences, demands, and oppression, in various ways. There were non-violent demonstrations in which students of color taped their mouths shut to symbolize the exhaustion of talking about issues of racism and the administration taking no action.

Other students presented pieces of spoken word exposing the wounds the institution has inflicted upon them. Leaders of the Black Student Union presented a list of demands and a call to action from the administration. Students spoke, cried, yelled, asked, challenged, and attempted to humanize our presence on this campus. We represent such a low percentage in statistical records on campus and in the hour we had for the forum, many brave students attempted to give those numbers a name, a story, a face, and a body.

**But what went unrecognized by every single member of the administration seated in front of us was the pain required to recount our stories – to recount how we survive this space.**



Image by Fibonacci Blue